



Cassirer's View of Language

Ying Shen

School of Foreign Language (SFL), Peking University

HaiDian District, Beijing 100871, China

E-mail: christieshen@hotmail.com

Abstract

Myth is the breakthrough point of Cassirer's philosophy; Art is one of key words to understand his defined language; and Symbolism infiltrates into all aspects of human cultures especially language. The shift of Cassirer from great theories of science and philosophy to the world of art, language, myth, and culture mirrors his bold and imaginative analyses of human culture and language.

Keywords: Language, Art, Symbolism, Rationalism, Myth, Metaphor

1. about Language and Art

1.1 Background: the Understanding of Language and Art of Plato

Poet is the object of scorn and derision in Plato's *the Republic*. He even thought manufacturer was a more socially recognized occupation than poet. In Plato's idea, handicraft was the "copy" of the "real world", and the literary output was only the imitation of "copy", which not only stray from the "true", but would even misguide people. Plato's opinion mirrors the philosopher's distrust of Language and Arts, leading us in the dilemma of Antinomy and Skepticism once again.

Plato's opinion is not unfounded. At that time, Sophists using the Art of Rhetoric as their weapon was prevalent in Ancient Greece. In Plato's view, the inflation of Language fallacy and sophistry was due to Art fallacy and sophistry, and the members of Sophists were not "Word philosopher" but "Word artists". Meanwhile, in the early stages of human culture, poetry and metaphor, as one of the most primitive and basic characteristics of language, were used in sorcery and superstition. Therefore, Plato disdained and revolted against the "artistry" of "language" after seeing through the whole picture.

1.2 The View of Cassirer

Considering Plato's understanding was ex parte, Cassirer re-interpreted the value of language and art in his masterpiece *Language and Art*. Although admitting "the copy of the world would never as true and perfect as its real features", Cassirer pointed out "language should not be regarded as copies of matter but the condition of object concept." Why? Cassirer supported his view by linguistics, psychopathology and psychology of speech and held many interesting examples.

There is a kind of disease named aphasia in psychopathology. Although people with aphasia do not lose their ability of word application, they can not use words modestly to denote and style objects. In other words, patients may not accurately call the name of an object, but they are really good at using words in another purpose: to express their feelings. For example, they may find it difficult to get out the word of "fire" when they encounter the fire, but they can say "fire" to express fear when they are in dangerous situation. The famous British psychiatrist Jackson has brought forward the terms of "low-level language" and "high-level language", the former means using language to express emotions while the latter means using language in declarative way. Psychology of speech has proved that the characteristic of objective "statement" of language is the most significant features of human language.

So, what is the value of the characteristic of objective "statement"? Its value lies in helping us to "unit all sense datum into a notional entia". Animals are invariably lack of identify ability when they are in changing environment, however, human would not. Thanks to the abstract thinking and the identity of language symbols, people can sum up universal "concept" from former "experience". Thus, although without its own real world, language becomes the tool of human thinking and helps us to understand the world instead of just imitating it.

The role of poet is certainly not as low as that in Plato's book; on the contrary, the poets are the best person in dominating these concepts. They turn "the stone of universal language" into a "literary gem"; they throw the abstract general day-to-day language into the Gold Furnace of imagines to cast it into a new form. Therefore, some people regard "poesy" as the superlative form of literature. In their opinion, Poesy is a form of domination of "concept", but Novel is the imitation to the "real world" to a certain extent.

The creative process of the Art, in Cassirer's idea, was a configuration process that need for emotional and rational

thinking, therefore, the form of the Art was a kind of "emotional - rational structure". However, fundamentally speaking, the Art was primarily a perceptual intuition and would bring spiritual freedom to audiences in the process of the aesthetic.

This shows that the traditional view of "Arts is the imitation of nature" is narrow-minded. "Like all the other symbolic forms art is not the mere reproduction of a ready-made, given reality. It is one of the ways leading to an objective view of things and of human life. It is not an imitation but a discovery of reality," Cassirer wrote in *Essay on Man*.

Cassirer concludes that both Art and Language, which are not just "second nature" but quite independent, are original human capacity and ability. With this capacity, human successfully found and organized their perceptual world, notional world and intuitive world. What they own is not only the re-creation but the features and value of creation and conformation, which make the Language and the Arts significantly influential in the human society.

2. about Language and Symbolism

2.1 Background: Descartes' view about rationality and irrationality

The main stream history from Ancient Greece to the present History of Western Thought is a history of competition between rationality and irrationality.

From the view of methodology, Cartesian rationalism started with the Universal Scepticism and regarded "Cogito, ergo sum (I think, therefore I am)" as the starting point, and deduced to the whole epistemology system by the intuitive and interpreted way. The formation of Cartesian rationalism philosophy is mainly due to the promotion of traditional culture in three aspects, that is, the profound impact of the rational tradition of the Ancient Greece, the full preparation of rational spirit of Medieval Philosophy and the powerful impact of the Renaissance humanistic ideas. Cartesian rationalism philosophy has brought great influence to the rationalism of the European continent and the development of other philosophy.

With the reasonable corpus of free will, Cartesian rationalism philosophy excludes the thinking, actions and existence that not comply with the new rational requirement from the western social life. Although there were self-induced conflicts in the view of physical and psychological dualism of Cartesian philosophy, it brought far-reaching effects to the subsequent rationalists.

There is a complement philosophic objective between rationality and irrationality, which reflect on not only the rationality unable to do anything without imagination, intuition, emotion and will, but also the truth is sometimes from the mouths of irrational persons.

There is no denying that human knowledge, thought and reality are all included with these two factors-rationality and irrationality, thereby we should return to the historical origin of this integrated mass.

2.2 The View of Cassirer

Cassirer's symbolic form has different presentation in different periods of history and impenetrates in all human culture such as language, myth, art and science.

Cassirer defined people as "symbolic animal" in his symbolic philosophy. In his view, human beings were symbol-making as well as tool-making animals. They understood their world and shaped their lives in large part by assigning meanings to objects, beings, and persons, by connecting things together in symbolic patterns, and by creating elaborate forms of symbolic action and narrative. Studying how symbols were created and structured and how they were drawn on and gave meaning to different domains of the human world could enable us understand language, the Existence of the World and the Significance of the World.

"Man has, as it were, discovered a new method of adapting himself to his environment. Between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the symbolic system. This new acquisition transforms the whole of human life. As compared with the other animals man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new dimension of reality."

Page.26-*An Essay on Man*

In terms of the whole symbolic system, Cassirer thought the form of symbol was perceptual and the formation process was motile; he pointed out that the Art, as a form of symbol, was quite different from Science.

In Cassirer's view, language is rational - "or even the same as the source of rationality". In a word, rationality is not a very adequate way to understand the rich and diversity of human cultural life. Therefore, Cassirer came to the conclusion that "human" should be defined as "symbolic animal". While the emotional language is paratactic with the concept of language, the logical or scientific language is tied for the language of poetic imagination; thereby language can not be summed up only by rationality.

3. about Language and Myth

In *Language and Form* Cassirer wrote that language and myth began as one, originally standing "in an indissoluble correlation with one another, from which they both emerge but gradually as independent elements..." Language also bears within self, from its very beginning, the power of logic.

In the earliest phases language clings to the concrete phenomenon, exemplified among others by the Arabic use of between five to six thousand terms to describe a camel. The expression of words came from the sacred name, which has the decisive force in the thought of early man. Myth develops into art and the development of written language leads eventually toward mathematics and science, although in poetry language still has its original power. The abstract of language derived from metaphor thinking, which is the foundation of language classification. It is clear from the language generation that language is poetry in nature. "The greatest lyric poets, for instance Hölderlin or Keats, are men in whom the mythic power of insight breaks forth again in its full intensity and objectifying power."

Since language and myth were expressive ab origine in Cassirer's opinion, he combined language with myth and inspected this combination, and paid great attention to both natural sciences and humanities - literature, history and the arts.

Cassirer's own merit lies in the fact that he took the lead in guiding philosophy into the scope of myth and language through developing and promoting the West "unorthodox" humanistic philosophy from Vico to Herder and Humboldt.

As is well known, anthropology, mythology, linguistics, psychology and other disciplines have rapidly developed since the second half of the nineteenth century. It is not difficult to know that Cassirer's "extended epistemology", to some extent, reflected the request of rapid rise in these subjects and, with the continual development of human knowledge, the inevitable trend of cultural synthesis and philosophy sum-up. It can be said that the rise of the French Structuralism promotes Cassirer's "extended epistemology" at a higher level, thereby, the "humanities philosophy" in Continental Europe entered upon a new stage.

The noteworthiness of Structuralism is that, on one hand, it tried to seek for a unified and universal foundation of epistemology and methodology for every dispersive and specific areas of humanities research (structural linguistics); on the other hand, all its main representatives have "critical" studied a specific field of humanities and promoted significant changes in that field, such as: Anthropology and Mythology (Levi. Strauss), History and Sociology (Michel. Foucault), Literary Theory and Literary Criticism (Roland. Barthes), the Depth Psychology (Jacques. Lacan) and so on.

The effort made by Cassirer to guide the philosophy study into the scope of myth and language in the 1920s could be considered as the critical inspection of the humanities from epistemology.

Everything has greatly changed when philosophy entering into the field of myth. Because the act or practice of envisioning things in myth, as Cassirer has pointed out, is not in accordance with the logical way of thinking but its unique way of mythological thinking, which is named the "metaphorical thinking" by Cassirer. This kind of thinking also has ideational function. However, while logical thinking forms "abstract conception" by abstract method, metaphorical thinking forms "concrete concept" according to the principle of "Pars prototo".

"Whenever any word, that was at first used metaphorically, is used without a clear conception of the steps that led from its original to its metaphorical meaning, there is danger of mythology; whenever those steps are forgotten and artificial steps put in their places, we have mythology, or, if I may say so, we have diseased language, whether that language refers to religious or secular interests."

Page.86-Language and Myth

Language and Myth is to indicate that the Metaphorical Thinking in myth is the most primitive and basic way of thinking for human being, as the "metaphorical" is the essential feature of "language" (language develops with myth), and the function of logical thinking and abstract conception could only be founded and developed on the basic of metaphorical thinking of myth and concrete concept. This means that all knowledge and culture of human being is not fundamentally based on logical concept and logical thinking but the "prelogical concept and expression".

4. Epilogue

Since the advent of *Language and Myth*, this book has become a classical reading for theorists of Western Aesthetic and Literary. The efforts made by Cassirer to guide philosophy into the field of myth and language not only reflected the important trend of philosophy in Continental Europe, but also demonstrated the causes and development of his "Philosophy of Symbolic Forms". Reading *Language and Myth* and its related books would be the best way to understand Cassirer's thinking and a wonderful approach to go deep into language.

References

Ernest Cassirer. *Language and Form*.

Ernest Cassirer. *The Language and Myth*. P85<The Power of Metaphor>.

Ernest Cassirer. *The Language and Myth*. P86<The Power of Metaphor>.

Ernst Cassirer. (1944). *An Essay on Man*.

Ernst Cassirer. (1944). *An Essay on Man*.

Ernst Cassirer. *Language and Art*.

Ernst Cassirer. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923-29). Cassirer described that human beings were above all a symbolizing animals in this work.

Mo Weimin. (2005). *Mo Weimin talks about Foucault*. All English words are translated from Chinese by myself. p. 81-84. Peking University Press.

Palmer, Donald D. *Structuralism and Poststructuralism for Beginners*.

Philosophers of Ancient Greek researched philosophy by asking questions, which could be categorized into three directions that have respectively found the basic disciplines of philosophy: Metaphysics, Epytimology and Ethics.

Plato. *The Republic*. Yale University Press.

Yannis Stavrou. *Artists, their Work & our Age*.